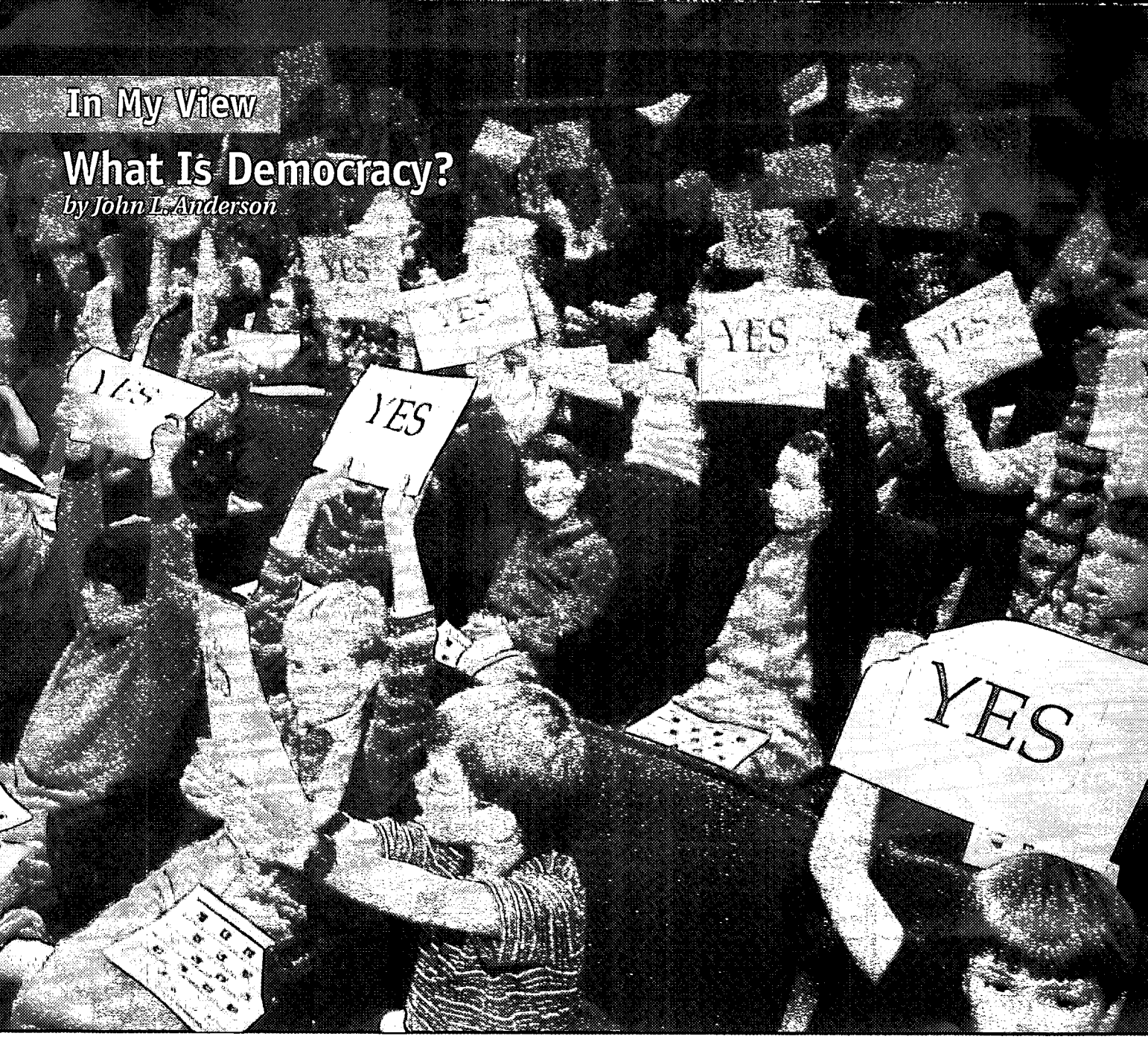
In My View

What Is Democracy?

by John L. Anderson



Let me begin with a caveat. Much of the difficulty with defining democracy derives from suggestions that an ideal of democracy exists and one need only describe it clearly—as though democracy has some metaphysical existence. Fortunately, definitions designed to delineate an abstract notion do not exist in the complex world of the large, vibrant democracy in the United States. The assumption that a perfect definition of democracy exists troubles clarity from the outset and forces thinkers to find a path around the source of their troubled thoughts.

Rather than taking on the question directly, many political thinkers attempt to sketch characteristics, or outcomes or preconditions, because democracy itself is such a difficult concept to define. Even one of the foremost democratic theorists, Robert Dahl (1998), bemoaned that a "tidy set of ideas" about democracy is not available. Still, an indirect approach to defining democracy is valuable because it provides useful concepts to consider and use in conversations about democracy and education. With that in mind,

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a recounting of a few foundational thoughts, taken from both ancient and modern theorists, should provide a basis for conversations, if not a basis for action in the school and community.

Public Interest

The most basic analysis of democracy is available in the political thought of Aristotle (1958). In Greek, democracy signified rule (*kratein*) by the masses (*demos*). The Greek word, *demos*, was not at all positive, however, because it indicated the masses in their worst form. You might even say that "democracy" was used to describe an approach to governing that would be better translated as "mobocracy." A mob, or *demos*, is simply selfish, and members of it are interested in obtaining their own base needs. Through Aristotle's theoretical lens, governments are problematic when people rule with their self-interest in mind, because that form of government cannot seek more than mere life, which by definition must be a perversion.

On the other hand, Aristotle (1958) believed that a majority could rule with the "public interest" in mind and be a positive form of government, which he called a *politeia* (polity) or civic body. We might call the positive form of government a "moral democracy" where people seek the good life for all. In sum, a moral democracy, in current parlance, must be concerned with the "public interest," and its citizens should be aware that simple self-interestedness presents a persistent problem for democratic governance.

Plurality of Differences

Morality in a democracy is more than a matter of caring for one another, because simply caring would make democratic governance far too easy. Finding democracy easy to do indicates that people have ignored the plurality of differences and interests among them; or, that they can easily govern by providing care for people who are like them. Another central principle of any democracy is that the plural natures of human beings necessitate difficulties with governing. For instance, as most experienced teachers know, classroom rules may look fine on paper, but applying the rules with students who differ in their experience, minds, and bodies is seldom easy. Still, the application of rules to govern a classroom may work so that everyone in the class learns how to live with one another; and that is a positive development.

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When democratic governance works, it has an effect on the moral development of citizens and students. Many democratic theorists have explained how this development works, but John Dewey saw it most clearly. Dewey (1990) argued that engaged learning liberates students to govern themselves *and* recognize the "openness of the human spirit." Beyond the schools in a democracy, morality has to do with the development of the community and all the individuals who compose it. For example, consider Alexis de Tocqueville's view of jury service in America (around 1830). De Tocqueville (1981) argued that juries serve a democratic purpose because service on a jury tends to make citizens understand and consider carefully how to apply the law in all its complexities. Jury members have to come to grips with the fate of their fellow citizen in terms of the evidence and the law, which is often a sobering experience.

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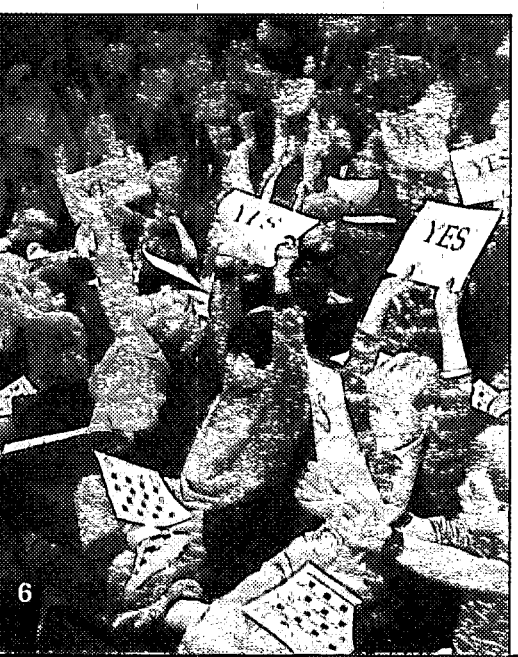
Understanding the usefulness of democratic engagement in moral development may be served by another example. Charles Rangel, a U.S. Representative from New York, has argued in favor of reinstating the military draft. Representative Rangel

claimed that as citizens of a democracy, each person should have to wrestle more intensely over the issue of waging a war, knowing that the war directly affects our sons and daughters, friends, and selves. Rangel reasoned that when citizens have to judge actions that carry serious consequences for people they know, they are more aware of the costs of such actions.

Too often, citizens think about democracy only in the political domain and forget that they also govern themselves elsewhere. The concept of citizens governing themselves is actually a defining characteristic of a democracy. True, Americans may engage in debates about waging war, but they also have opportunities to rule themselves in their everyday actions. A whole litany of questions about governing one's own life meets each citizen on a daily basis. Should I help my neighbor by watching her house while she is on vacation? Should I yield for that driver who wants to change lanes? Should I finish grading papers tonight so I can keep my promise to my students? In fact, a liberal democracy (a rights-based form of government that protects citizens from governmental actions) promises that each citizen will have room to govern his or her own life in both the social and political realms—or, we might say, room to govern behavior in both the private and public realms of life.



Trusting Relationships

An invaluable addition to life flows from democratic communities in the form of trusting social relationships. Social interactions typified by trust form the bases for democracies (Putnam 1993). For example, when citizens of industrial democracies drive their cars, they normally follow the rules of the road. The laws of the state dictate that drivers use turn signals, obey speed limits, come to a complete stop at a stoplight, and keep a safe distance between cars. I even find myself following those rules when no one is around, when no one is there to catch me breaking the rules. I follow the rules of the road, and others can trust that I will.

In fact, most citizens of the United States follow norms of behavior regardless of the situation. The next time you are in the halls of a school or in an airport, watch how people generally move to the right and pass slower walkers on the left. Each member of a democratic society understands the norms of social behavior, and the result is that other persons can behave in a trusting manner because of remarkably reliable patterns. That trust makes living in a democracy easier. Trust is a hallmark of democracy.

More than a Tidy Definition

As educators, we should avoid thinking that a simple definition of democracy exists. Rather than adopting a tidy set of concepts to explain democracy, we should construct a frame of mind that can include a variety of foundational notions. Those notions should include, first, that seeking the public interest helps us develop a morality based upon concern for others. Second, in democracies, governing others is never simple because of the plurality of differences among people. Third, democracy works well when people govern themselves in reliable, trustworthy ways. Of course, there is a fourth; education is necessary because citizens do not easily learn how to govern themselves and others in ways that are democratic.

> **"Education is necessary because citizens do not easily learn how to govern themselves and others in ways that are democratic."**

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